

First Sunday in Creation: Forest Sunday

READINGS

Genesis 2.4b-22

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,* and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. ¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

¹⁸Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ ¹⁹So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man* there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Psalms 139.13-16

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

Acts 17.22-28

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor* he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God* and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

John 3.1-16

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus* by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’* Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You* must be born from above.”* The wind* blows where it chooses, and you

hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^{*} do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^{*} And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^{*}

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

BIBLE STUDY



EARTH'S FAMILY COMES ALIVE

Beginning

The theme of our study is our deep kinship with Earth and the creatures of Earth, including the trees of the forest. We all come from Earth and are still connected with Earth as our biological parent.

Begin by sharing a memory of when you felt connected with Earth or close to some part of creation.

It may be a tree where you found shelter, a cave, garden soil or an animal. Strange as it may seem, one creature with which I feel connected is a blue wren. Whenever that tiny bird bounces through the bushes of the bush, I have a sense of the Spirit stirring my spirit. What is your memory?

Exploring the text

Read Genesis 2 verses 4b-7

You have probably read this story many times. This time you are invited to read the story with Earth in mind. How is Earth connected to the first human and to God? Keep your own Earth memory in mind as you read.

The opening scene is striking. No rain. No vegetation. No trees. No life. No human beings. Earth seems to be like a desert with a single stream flowing from the centre.

This Earth reading explicitly says that there were no human beings to 'till' the ground. It is important to note that the original Hebrew verb for 'till' (*abad*) normally means 'serve', as one would serve a master or serve in the temple. This suggests that the original function of humans is to serve Earth and take care of it.

Then God forms the first human from the dust of the ground. In other words, Earth is the stuff of which humans are made. Humans come from Earth. Humans are Earth. This is also reflected in the fact that the word for ground (*adamah*) is the feminine form of the word for human being (*adam*) otherwise known as Adam. We might say humans are humous!

Discuss: Do the insights of this Earth reading suggest that as children of Earth we could call Earth our parent? Are you an Earth child? Can you think of times when you felt connected to Earth as your mother? Or do you feel a tension between this idea of connection with Earth and being a child of Christ?

After God forms the first human from the dust of the ground, God breathes the 'breath of life' into the nostrils of the human form. The form made from dust comes alive! Life comes from God, from the breath blowing through the soil from Earth. Elsewhere in the Bible this life giving breath is called the wind or Spirit of God. When we take a deep breath we can feel life from God flowing through our bodies even today.

The Spirit of God is that deep impulse that makes everything in Earth come to life. Earth and her children are alive because the Spirit of God breathes life into everything. In short, *we are all born of Earth and the Spirit.*

In the reading from the book of Acts for this Sunday (17.22-28), St Paul maintains not only that all human beings have a common ancestor, but also that all of us has a sense of originating from the Creator and possess within us a spirit that searches for this God. We are all

children of Earth imbued with a spirit that searches for our Maker.

Read Genesis 2 verses 8-9

In the next episode of this narrative, God plants trees. To be more specific, God causes the trees to emerge out of the ground. Just as the first human is taken from the Earth, so too is the vegetation. Trees are also Earth born.

These trees provide a home for the first man, a forest home with both trees that appeal to our senses and trees that provide sustenance. And Earth is still such a home for all of us, even if it is no longer called Eden. Note that the trees God plants in the forest of Lebanon are called 'trees of YHWH' (Ps. 104.16-17). Eden is a forest of trees not an English garden!

Discuss: Do these verses give us any indication of how we should relate to trees? Do you recall a time, perhaps as a child, when you had a special feeling about a tree or a forest?

Conscious of the Crisis

The famous ecologist David Suzuki has written a children's book entitled *You are the Earth*. In that book he outlines how we are composed of Earth—its water, air, heat, soil. Each of us can say that Earth is the source of our bodies, our minds and our breath. We are soil and air, water and wonder. We are indebted to Earth for the way our blood flows, our heart beats and our lungs move. Without Earth we would not be. The brown and the green of Earth are part of us. The oceans and the atmosphere are part of us. We are especially indebted to the forests that keep supplying us with oxygen.

Do the insights of David Suzuki and other ecologists help us appreciate the biblical message that each of us is indeed an Earth child, made from the dust of Earth? Given our identity as creatures born of Earth, how should we relate to our planet home?

Exploring the Text

Read Genesis 2 verses 15-20

Verses 15-17 are key verses in this text. Most Bible studies, however, tend to focus on the command of God not to eat from the tree of knowledge. Just as important is the commission implied in verse 15. What is the role God assigns to this human being, and by implication to all human beings?

The first human is placed on Earth in the forest garden 'to till it and keep it'. As we noted in connection with verse 5 above, the verb translated 'till' (*abad*) normally means 'serve', as one would serve a master or serve as a priest in a temple. The commission of this verse could then be rendered 'to serve and to preserve.'

Discuss: The role of humans, already signalled in verse 5, is to serve and preserve Earth, especially the forest of Earth. What do you think that means today?

The next moment in the story comes as something of a surprise to us today, perhaps because we have lost any strong sense of kinship with living creatures other than human beings. God recognises that the first man should not be alone on Earth. He needs a partner, a suitable companion. So why does God not immediately create a woman?

Instead, God creates all the animals and birds on Earth. To be more precise, the animals and birds also emerge from the ground. They too are Earth born like the first human and the forest. All living things on Earth are kin. They are all Earth born, all part of one family. They all come alive through God's Spirit.

It is presumably this kinship with living creatures that the first human learns as he meets each of them as a potential partner. Animals are not extras on Earth. They are kin that Adam names, as he would children. Some writers seem to think that naming something implies power over it. But that is clearly not the case, when in a mood of celebration, the women of the neighbourhood named Obed, the adopted son of Naomi (Ruth 4.17).

Discuss: Are there animals with which you feel a strong sense of kinship? What are the implications of speaking about all creatures on Earth as Earth born, all part of one Earth family?

Read Genesis 2 verses 20-25

The climax of the story comes when God creates a woman. She is the only one who is not taken directly from the ground and born of Earth. She represents the next generation, flesh and bone from the flesh and bone of the first human. She is from flesh but ultimately also from Earth like all subsequent generations of life on Earth.

She is the companion God promised. She is not only a soul mate but also a flesh mate. They become one flesh. From that one flesh children are born; they too are Earth children, born of flesh and the Spirit.

Discuss: Woman is the final piece in this creation narrative. Does the concept of an original Earth family—man, woman, vegetation, birds and animals from Earth—make you rethink your relationship with the natural world? If so, how?

Read Psalm 139

The Earth reading from Genesis 2 suggests that Earth is our mother. Is this concept explicit anywhere else in the Old Testament?

One of the clearest texts that identify Earth as our mother is found in the opening chapter of the Book of Job. After being unjustly harassed by the God of heaven and deprived of all possessions, Job turns to Earth as his initial source of life and comfort. His words are famous.

Naked I came from my mother's womb,
And naked I shall return there!
YHWH gives and YHWH takes away!
Blessed be the name of YHWH. (Job 1.21)

It is clear from the speech in chapter 3 that the expression 'there' refers to Earth, the place where all humans reside when they die, whether they are taskmasters or slaves (Job 3. 17-18). That place is a place of rest for all. That place is home, the mother from which Job emerged, the source and solace of his life under harassment from heaven.



Psalm 139 includes a similar Earth reading. The Psalmist explores the wonder of human birth, the intricate mysteries of human embryos moulded every day by the Creator. The fascinating dimension of this portrait is that the poet begins in verse 13 by giving us the impression that the embryo is being delicately created in our human mother. As we read, in verses 14 and 15, we discover that there is another dimension, a deeper womb—mother Earth.

Earlier in the Psalm, the poet reflected on God's deep understanding of every aspect of the Psalmist's life and inner being. The Spirit of God, the hidden divine presence, reaches into even the most hidden crevices of

the cosmos (139.7-8). The spirit is present when the embryo is formed, penetrating the depths of Earth. The spirit knows the impulse to give birth that lies deep in Earth and every mother. Every child is an Earth child.

Discuss: Many of us educated in the Western world may not feel a close bond with Earth as a parent, or more specifically a mother. Does this biblical image help reconnect you with Earth in a special way?

Connecting with Christ

The Gospel reading linked with this Earth reading is the story of Jesus talking with Nicodemus (John 3.1-16). At a pivotal point in that story, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be 'born of water and the Spirit.' When we are baptised we believe that we are also 'born of water and the Spirit'. We experience a second birth.

As baptised Christians we are a people BOTH born of Earth and the Spirit AND born of water and the Spirit. Both births are a vital part of who we are. Both births are to be celebrated!

We note that our second birth is not a birth by the Spirit only and somehow disconnected from creation. Just as our first birth is by the Spirit AND Earth, so our second birth is by the Spirit AND water!

Jesus speaks of the Spirit as a silent wind blowing mysteriously where it wills. All who connect with this Spirit, connect with God, with this mystery. So we are connected with God both by being born of Earth and the Spirit and also by being born of water and the Spirit in Baptism. We are both children of Earth and children of God, members of Earth's family as well as God's family.

Discuss: Do you think there has been a tendency in the Christian church to focus almost exclusively on the fact that we are born of water and the Spirit and to ignore our identity as children born of Earth and the Spirit? Is our birth from Earth and the Spirit also important for our faith and identity as God's children?

Closing with Praise

Participants may wish to close by singing two verses of the following song using the melody of

'Guide me O Thou Great Jehovah'.

SONG OF THE WILD

*You who watch the highest heavens
Wond'ring where God's mansions are;
You who hope to spot an angel
Spinning like a falling star;
Earth is calling,
Earth is calling,
Come back home and rest in me.
Come back home and rest in me.*

*You who long for bread like manna
Falling from the hand of God? Know
that Earth provides your water,
Precious breath and daily food.
Earth is calling,
Earth is calling,
Come back home and dine with me.
Come back home and dine with me.*

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Prayer

*Christ we celebrate with creation that we
are born of Earth and the Spirit, born of
water and the Spirit, and born to join
creation in praising you.
Amen.*